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TAGS: PGOV SOCI KDEM KPAL JO  
SUBJECT: JORDAN: OFFICIALS WARN JOURNALISTS AGAINST RUMORS

REF: A. AMMAN 1764  
B. AMMAN 1423

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen R. Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) In recent days and in the wake of King Abdullah's August 4 speech against rumor-mongering (reftel A), two top Jordanian officials have publicly called on journalists to stop reporting on potentially divisive issues. On August 13, PM Nader Al-Dahabi warned chief editors of Jordanian dailies to "ensure that issues that harm national unity or threaten the community's stability are not raised." On August 10, Interior Minister Nayef Al-Qadi urged media outlets to stop taking "instructions from outside the country," while urging them to defend Jordan's national interests. Five days later, Qadi publicly asserted that the wide span of freedoms made possible by electronic media should be based on ethical and professional concepts. Both officials claimed that journalists would continue to benefit from unlimited freedom of expression, with Dahabi reiterating a past comment by the King that "the sky is the limit" in terms of press freedoms. (Note: Despite Dahabi's emphasis on the King's comment, a number of legal mechanisms remain in place that encourage self censorship by the media. End Note.)

¶2. (C) Dahabi and Qadi's remarks follow a series of unusual developments this summer: personnel shuffles in the military and Interior Ministry-controlled police forces, the harsh gendarmerie response to a port workers' strike in Aqaba, the withdrawal of citizenship from an unknown number of Palestinians in Jordan, and a near-riot at a symbolically significant soccer game. They also follow a spate of columns that drew wide readership on a burgeoning number of on-line news websites, such as Ammonnews.net that published a piece in early August by long-time AFP correspondent Randa Habib in which she indirectly criticized the King for failing to communicate clearly to Jordanians about current issues and urged him to find trusted and experienced advisors. Habib's comments prompted 21 pages of reader comments alternately praising Habib's frankness or attacking her. Earlier in the summer, Ammonnews also ran a controversial op-ed column, criticizing Palestinians in Jordan for failing to protest an Israeli proposal to turn Jordan into an alternative Palestinian homeland (reftel B). Separately, the Ammantimes news website launched itself earlier this month with a sensational report on allegations that the King's former Royal Court chief Bassem Awadallah had beaten his wife so badly that she was hospitalized. The story drew more than 10,000 hits in the first few days of its posting.

¶3. (C) Comment: Dahabi and Qadi's comments make it clear they are uncomfortable with recent media coverage of unspecified issues and want journalists to toe the line--but without specifying what the line is. Qadi's comments suggest that on-line media are the likely catalyst of the remarks. In the past, officials have controlled the media through a range of mechanisms, including interventions by security authorities, the use of penal code articles that permit the

imprisonment of journalists, and seeking the imposition of high fines under the Press and Publications law. These mechanisms have earned Jordan a "not-free" ranking in Freedom House's 2008 report on the media and contributed to broad self-censorship by Jordanian journalists. That said, the emergence of new media appear to have stretched the boundaries of what can be discussed by writers and their readers. What remains unclear is whether authorities will apply current restrictions to clamp down on media--particularly on-line sites--or seek to impose new mechanisms.

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